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CBS Producer Defends His Editing 'Standard' Practice Used, Court Told

By Eleanor Randolph
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NEW YORK, Dec. 12—The producer of a CBS documentary that is the subject of a \$120 million libel suit by retired general William C. Westmoreland today defended as "standard" reporting practice an editing procedure that has been criticized not only by Westmoreland but also by CBS.

However, U.S. District Court Judge Pierre N. Leval said the fact that some of the editing by producer George Crile violated CBS guidelines could not be used by Westmoreland's attorney to prove that the show was inaccurate or untrue.

"The fact that there is a rule at CBS that says 'don't do it' in no way adds to the issue of whether there was knowing falsity propagated in the broadcast," Leval told lawyers out of the jury's hearing.

As Westmoreland's lawyer, Dan M. Burt, tried to dissect the 1982 documentary "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception," Crile attempted to explain why one person was interviewed twice for the 90-minute broadcast, why quotations were shortened, why one person appeared to be misidentified and why a hypothetical question in one interview turned into an accusation about Westmoreland in the broadcast.

At one point, Burt asked Crile whether he tried to "coach" an interview subject, former Central Intelligence Agency official George Allen, by showing him what others had said about the issue being explored.

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"You knew when you showed Mr. Allen the interviews of other people . . . that that was not a proper thing to do, did you not, sir?" Burt asked.

"Mr. Burt," Crile responded, his tone equally cold, "it is standard reportorial procedure to tell people that you are interviewing information that you have gained, in the hopes that it will elicit more information from them."

Speaking directly to the jury in what sometimes seemed like an introductory course in television editing, Crile said that showing the interviews was "something that I think you see on broadcasts often, and it is something that reporters do on a regular basis."

The staunch defense of almost every aspect of the broadcast, even those that have been the most controversial within the television industry, occasionally placed Crile at odds with an internal review of the show by CBS executive Burton Benjamin.

Benjamin's 1982 report, which laid out what CBS perceived as the program's flaws and which Burt seemed to be following in his direct examination of Crile the last three days, has not been admitted into evidence. In it, Benjamin quotes Crile as acknowledging that showing the other interviews to Allen was "against the sensibilities of everyone here. . . . I don't think what I did was right."

Benjamin, who could be called as a prosecution witness to testify about his investigation, quoted Crile as saying that during the first interview, Allen was "caught in stage paralysis . . . I wanted to show him he wasn't alone out there."

While Crile has steadfastly defended a number of editing decisions for the show, he acknowledged today that viewers might have been confused by one section of the program, which accused Westmoreland of being part of a conspiracy to suppress higher enemy-troop data in 1967 in order to maintain support for the Vietnam war.

Asked about the section, which Burt said mistakenly identified retired Army colonel George Hamscher as head of a military intelligence team negotiating with the CIA for an official enemy-troop figure in 1967, Crile said he saw the passage differently.

"There was no desire or attempt to in any way leave an ambiguity there," he said. "To the extent that anyone could have been confused about Col. Hamscher, it was certainly not inadvertent. It was not on purpose."

Asked why a Westmoreland statement was shortened in the broadcast, Crile said there was a "camera run-out," meaning that the crew had changed film cassettes as the general finished his sentence.

In the broadcast, Westmoreland said that President Lyndon B. Johnson, like most politicians, loved good news and "wanted bad news like a hole in the head." He added, in a comment not broadcast, that Johnson "was given both the good and the bad, but he was inclined to accentuate the positive."

Crile said he believed that the omission "does not in any way distort what Gen. Westmoreland said."

Special correspondent John Kennedy contributed to this report.